DAWN

OPINION

Blaming the IMF

THE call by a panel, led by the planning and development minister, for 'urgent ease of doing business reforms' to more than double export revenues to over $60bn within three years is familiar rhetoric. The panel was formed by the prime minister to devise a strategy to exit the IMF programme once the current bailout facility ends at the end of next year. Its weeklong consultations with public and private sector stakeholders this month has apparently concluded that the current state of affairs cannot drive the 250m-strong population towards sustained progress due to cross-cutting constraints affecting all 20 priority export products and six export drivers. There is nothing new in the diagnosis of the problems hampering economic and export growth, or the solutions suggested by the panel. If anything, both diagnosis and prescription echo past policy pronouncements that were never followed up. The constraints to economic and export growth — high, volatile energy costs, policy unpredictability, distorted taxation, logistics and trade facilitation bottlenecks, institutional fragmentation, regulatory burden, etc — cited by the panel are old hat. These have featured in donor and government reports and in media commentary.

The persistence of these structural problems shows that the challenge lies less in their diagnosis or analysis and more in the state's capacity and willingness to deliver politically tough, rules-based reform. Against this backdrop, the panel's implicitly holding restrictive IMF financing responsible for the government's failure to aggressively implement reforms to return the economy to a sustainable growth path is an attempt to gloss over the state's own dereliction of duty. Indeed, the IMF programme conditions and targets primarily aim for economic and fiscal stabilisation by imposing fiscal discipline rather than driving the economy towards growth.

However, the lender does not stop the government from undertaking or implementing reforms to restructure the economy or address stagnant growth. For example, it may demand that the authorities increase tax revenues as a ratio of GDP to slash the budget deficit — which should encourage the government to broaden the tax base. Nor does it ask them to cut development spending — instead of this, the government could reduce its own wasteful expenditure. Rather, the IMF — ideological and policy differences with its prescriptions aside — encourages the government to create a conducive business clime. The authorities are blaming the IMF programme for a sluggish, moribund economy to cover up their own incompetence, and obscure the ruling party's unwillingness to dismantle the entrenched politically protected rent-seeking structures. Unless the government walks the talk on reform to create a rules-based economy, its rhetoric of doubling exports and breaking the proverbial begging bowl will remain a pipe dream.

Solo flight

THE KP chief minister's eventful visit to Sindh has thrown up the same questions that his recent, equally eventful trip to Punjab did: why this? Why now? Why has a relatively inexperienced PTI leader decided to go around the country to muster up a street movement, that too, at a time when both the appetite and space for agitational politics are considerably more restricted than before? If the purpose is to gain some more public sympathy for the beleaguered party, the effort is overkill. There has been no shortage of news reports and social media commentary on the travails the party and its supporters continue to face. If the purpose is to rally the public for some meaningful movement against the government, the PTI has clearly not read the room. There is no doubt that many still support the party, but that support continues to be passive. Is it that the KP chief minister felt compelled to take up this campaign in order to cement his own standing within the party? If so, that is an unfortunate reflection on the party and the unproductive expectations it has of its leaders.

It is worth noting that several prominent leaders from both the opposition and the government benches have recently signalled their intention to initiate a national-level dialogue. Those leading the effort from the opposition's side, under the TTAP banner, have been delegated the responsibility by none other than the PTI itself. Given that it is willing to get behind a dialogue, there is no logic behind the PTI simultaneously pursuing a separate 'street movement'. The PTI is signalling that it either does not trust its interlocutors or intends to betray the process. Neither is helping its cause. The party needs to show that it is ready to take practical steps that will help it achieve its aims. The individuals who sat down to sign the Charter of Democracy had been sworn rivals till they came to terms with the fact that, in politics, all players must eventually make compromises. Constant agitation and cage-rattling will not get the PTI what it seeks. Instead, doors are more likely to open if the party signals its readiness for change. It must stop sabotaging the possibility of a compromise and allow things to move towards a negotiated settlement.

Unchecked LPG use

THE tragic blast in Islamabad that killed a newly-wed couple and six others, and left many injured, has once again exposed the lethal risks surrounding Pakistan's widespread use of liquefied petroleum gas. While authorities have said the explosion appears to have been caused by a gas cylinder leak, a formal inquiry is still underway and the precise cause has yet to be confirmed. Even so, the pattern behind such tragedies is well established. Across Punjab and the wider country, similar incidents have become disturbingly routine. Between 2022 and 2025, nearly 500 LPG-related explosions and fires reportedly took place in Punjab alone, killing at least 25 people and injuring more than 240, many with permanent disabilities. In 2025, a series of major accidents — including a deadly LPG tanker explosion near Multan, a fatal cylinder blast at a Lahore shop and a tragic household explosion in Mardan — showed how easily a small leak or faulty valve can turn into a mass-casualty event.

So what causes such incidents to occur time and again? Chronic shortages of natural gas and rising energy prices have pushed millions of households, caterers and small businesses towards LPG cylinders. Yet this demand has been met by a largely unregulated supply chain. Although the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority authorises only a limited number of manufacturers, hundreds of small, illegal units continue to operate in the country, particularly in Punjab, producing cheap cylinders that do not meet even basic safety standards. Weak enforcement allows these products to circulate freely, while unsafe practices — such as refilling, storing cylinders in confined spaces, or using them at crowded events — remain widespread. The result is an ongoing public safety hazard. The government must move beyond post-disaster inquiries. Cracking down on illegal manufacturers, strengthening inspections, enforcing Ogra standards, and running sustained public-awareness campaigns are essential. Expanding reliable gas supply would reduce LPG dependence. Without action, such tragedies will continue, each time with a different grieving family.

BY ARIFA NOOR

Cities in our memories

Islamabad's greenery is being replaced by big roads, flyovers and underpasses.

I GREW up in a Lahore very different from the grey expanse it has now become. Back then, it was a sleepier city but a very green one. The main boulevard in Gulberg was a long road with a wide and very green belt in the centre that ran from the Jail Road-Sherpao intersection all the way to Liberty market. The road on both sides of this green expanse was smallish and not that busy. But as the city grew, a decision was made to broaden the road and reduce the green belt, in order to accommodate the traffic. Since then, concrete has swallowed up most of the green. And the traffic continues to be a nightmare. The roads are wide and there are limited spots for U-turns or crossings but the traffic is far from manageable. Those who are forced to walk have to dash across between fast-moving cars and motorcycles.

It is hard to think of any place in Lahore where the traffic is less chaotic, despite the flyovers and underpasses that have mushroomed all over the city, replacing the greenery in many cases. The canal, which once was the preferred spot for those who wanted to go for a 'long drive', is now a noisy, chaotic place, despite a series of underpasses. There was a time a drive next to the canal could be a relaxing affair as the city ended close to where Johar Town is. When an aunt of mine moved near Thokar Niaz Beg, it seemed so far away that a trip to her place was planned with as much fanfare as a day trip out of town. By now, of course, the city has spread far beyond what then seemed to be nowhere land.

The city has become much bigger, swallowing areas around it and the people travelling in and out and through the city have also increased; but decades later, no one seems to realise that widening roads and installing flyovers doesn't lead to a smooth traffic flow. In fact, more and bigger roads mean more cars and motorcycles. In the process, the sleepy green city of my childhood and youth has become ugly and concrete-ridden. For people such as myself who left Lahore some years ago, finding one's way is at times impossible.

Readers may be wondering what the point of this trip down memory lane is. There is a point. I was reminded of the disappearance of the city of my childhood because of the debate raging in Islamabad where trees have been cut down in what is said to be large numbers and in more than one location. For once, so intense and consistent was the criticism that the government was forced to pay attention.

The authorities, which range from climate change to interior to CDA, insist that only paper mulberry trees (the cause of allergies) were cut down and that each tree will be replaced by three saplings — as if a fully grown tree which is removed today can be adequately replaced by three saplings, which may or may not survive.

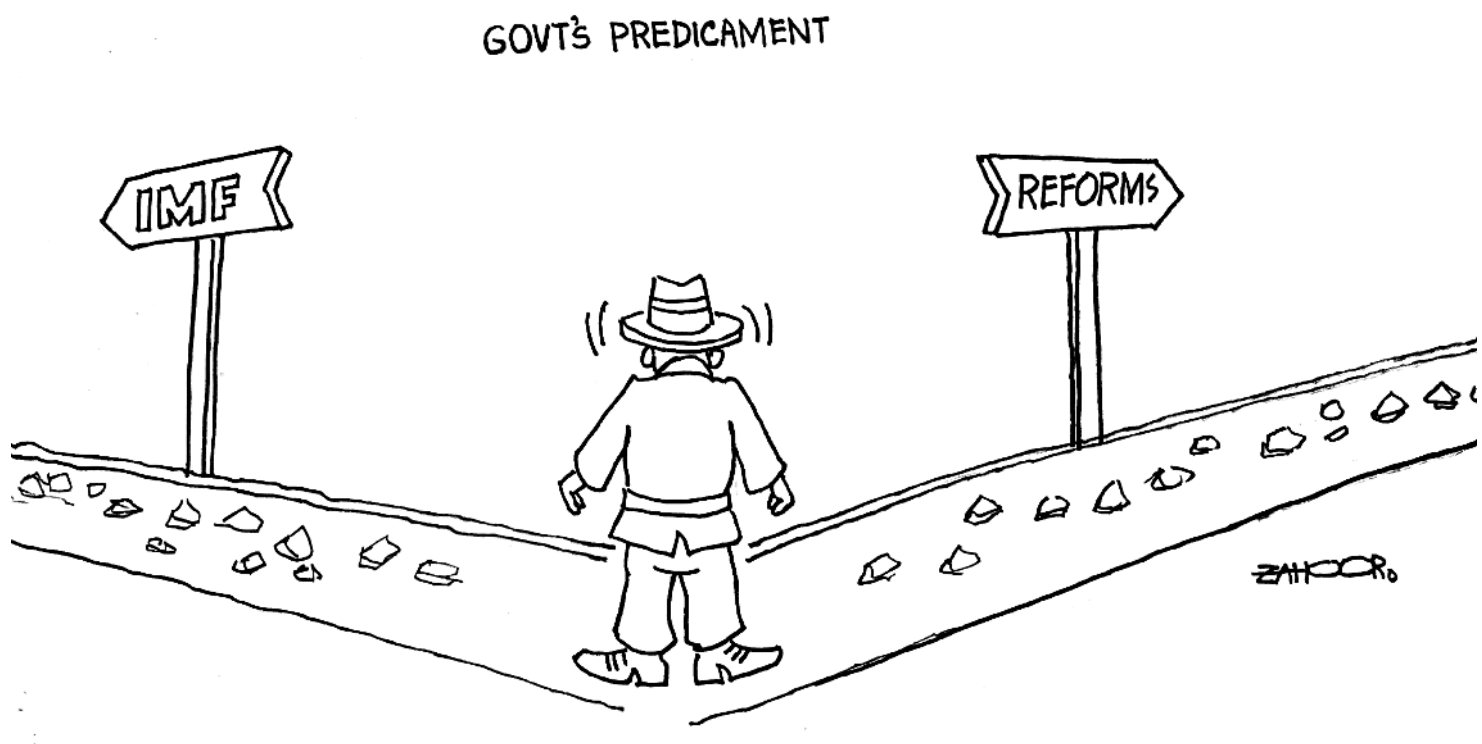
The larger context is not about how these trees were cut down but the mindset of what constitutes development and work across our political landscape. Since the 1990s, the political obsession is with building roads, broadening them, installing flyovers — a version of Dubai or Midwestern US. However, in the decades since, the world has moved on to a different version of urban living but as with our politics, we are stuck in a world and a vision that no longer works.

And so, 'development' continues to be pushed. In Islamabad, the greenery is being replaced by big roads, flyovers and underpasses with little thought for their need or their capacity to manage traffic. If it seems there is a crossing where there is a wait and queues due to traffic lights, the 'solution' is to build an interchange or flyovers. No one realises that the wider roads in Lahore will eventually prove insufficient. Slowly, the greenery will give way to more concrete till the city is unrecognisable to those who grew up in it decades ago. And with the challenge of climate change, more roads and cars with less green cover is really a case of pouring oil on fire.

At one level the problem is not just about outdated notions. They are also vanity projects for our ruling elite. In Islamabad, for instance, at one level the rapidity with which construction takes place is about 'Shehbaz speed' in competition with 'Mohsin speed'. If the former built one in record time, during his previous stint, taking over land belonging to a university, the current interior minister has to be faster and more efficient. He is now busy transforming the city and who can stop him? Education, land rights, city character, the discomfort of the poor who are forced to be pedestrians, are all irrelevant issues.

With this approach, is there any surprise that CDA officials went ahead and chopped down trees ruthlessly in different parts of the city? At one place it was to build a road to a new DHA phase; at another it was to help allergy patients. Who will ask questions about who profited from the wood, or the road to yet another housing society? In this environment, very few. Accountability has no role in this age of authoritarianism. And some years from now, when the air in Islamabad is as toxic as in Lahore, and the skies just as grey as the concrete covering the city, everyone will wring their hands, and blame the richer countries for climate change. Most of those who laid down this concrete in the shape of roads and housing societies (and profited from it) will be living in lands elsewhere. ■

The writer is a journalist.



BY JAWED NAQVI

With the sleeves rolled up

THE world is in ferment as the US lurches dangerously to the extreme right. Europe too has discarded a long cultivated democratic pretence and is eyeing its chance in the melee. Hungary, Poland, Austria and Italy have been singled out by Donald Trump's strategists, according to their leaked documents, to subvert democracy for a right-wing takeover in Trump's footsteps. British, French and German establishments are nudging their countries also towards militarism. EU is targeting Russia, Palestine and Iran even as Nato looks poised to implode in the chaos of Trump's claims over Greenland. The EU seeks to humour Trump over Venezuela while retaining a different yardstick to judge Vladimir Putin's advances in Ukraine.

But the masses are retaliating. Venezuela and Mexico are staging massive rallies with sleeves rolled up to combat Trump's threat to them. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, sensing enough was enough of his neighbour, is mending his country's ties with China. He could be visiting Beijing shortly to counter the ultimatums to Canada's economy.

Ideally, this is the time for the left to be initiating and, where possible, spearheading mass movements against the rightward slide. Jeremy Corbyn recently unfurled the flag with a separate party to challenge the British establishment, which includes his former Labour Party colleagues who he watched with dismay removing the last stitch of morality by abetting Benjamin Netanyahu's genocide in Gaza.

French left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon is leading a mass upsurge against Emmanuel Macron and the EU, accusing European leaders of "prostrate servility" to Trump. M lenchon homed in on President Emmanuel Macron's ideas on sending troops and long-range weapons to Ukraine. He demanded referendums in Donbass, Crimea and all contested regions because "it's the people who decide" rather than warmongering elites who "don't give a damn about people's lives".

The left in the US is punching above its weight to hold its ground, using every chink in Trump's armour to put up a promising fight for democracy. In the absence of trustworthy support from the mainstream media, YouTube channels are abuzz with analysts and activists keeping Trump in their crosshairs. A white woman activist raging against MAGA's nativism was murdered by Trump's hired guns from ICE. The killing in Minneapolis has set off a prairie fire across states. In the absence of vocal criticism of Trump from the Congress, the left, increasingly joined by Jewish students and senior scholars, is intervening strategically to ensure that Trump gets his comeuppance in the November mid-term polls and thereby can be reined in from doing further damage. Regardless of the outcome the left won't be accused of sitting on its hands when America was dismembering democracy.

Brazil and Colombia have slammed Trump's abduction of a fellow Latin American president from his home in Caracas. Trump's toolkit for Iran is different. A colour revolution is being quelled, says Pepe Escobar, a well-regarded Brazilian observer of the Middle East. Regardless of the images posted in Western media, Escobar says the Iranian leadership is braced for another round of war with US and Israel, only this time better prepared. It is a testament to the feckless ways of the left that a group like Mujahideen-i-Khalq, which was instrumental in deposing the Shah of Iran, has become a catspaw for Israeli and US intrusion in its own country. Veteran Iran watchers are sanguine that without the organisational skills and a well-oiled machinery of the deeply camouflaged Mujahideen-i-Khalq, Reza Pahlavi, the former crown prince would have no standing with the rioters.

> This is the time for the left to be initiating and, where possible, spearheading mass movements against the rightward slide.

The Gulf has also been jolted by the events in Venezuela. "We are entering an era where international guarantees are fragile, institutions are weakened and power speaks louder than principle. Awareness today is not a luxury; it is a requirement for survival," cautioned Saudi Arabia's *Arab News*. It stressed that the seizure of Russian funds in Western banks was a betrayal of crucial trust that the world took for granted. "The lesson is clear. The time to act is now." Interestingly, the writer in the Saudi paper is prominent UAE businessman Khalaf Ahmad Al-Habtoor. It says something for the thread that still unifies the two countries despite their recent aloofness.

South Asia is inevitably deeply affected by the turn of events unfolding at breakneck speed in the Middle East and in Latin America. Pakistan, currently in the good books of Trump (for no palpable reason), has spoken out boldly on the heist in Venezuela, with its defence minister reportedly calling for the abduction of Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu by the US (instead of Nicol s Maduro who should be freed). Bangladesh has witnessed street protests for Nicol s Maduro.

However, India, once a champion of lost causes in the Global South has been slow poisoned into becoming a basket case by its leaders seeking anchor in the West. When George W. Bush was in bad odour right across the world, a PEW survey said India was the rare country where Bush was popular. What does that say about the current leadership? Pulverised as a stag caught in the headlights of an approaching truck, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has left his foreign policy to the tender care of hope and prayer. What excites him, however, is any lurking campaign to win another state election, or even a municipal poll, preferably by communally polarising voters.

Modi's calendar this year perhaps captures the essence of his preferences and fears. To cheer him, assembly polls are due in opposition-ruled West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in May. On the other hand, he is to host the BRICS summit around August, which comes with the terror of having to take an unequivocal stand on Trump's thuggery and India's one-sided love with the US. In the meantime, China, Russia and Iran began a week of joint naval exercises in South Africa's waters on Saturday. The 'BRICS Plus operation' would "ensure the safety of shipping and maritime economic activities". The sleeves have been rolled up, mostly. ■

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